U.S. Probing 2 Murders in Guatemala

Adviser Lake Orders Records Preserved

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The Clinton administration took a series of steps yesterday to secure any documents or other records relating to a possible U.S. government role in two deaths allegedly ordered by a Guatemalan colonel who was a CIA informer, White House officials said.

The actions came after Rep. Robert G. Torricelli (D-N.J.) informed the White House and the Justice Department of allegations by an anonymous employee of the National Security Agency that the Army and the NSA may have known about the two murders when they occurred. According to the allegations, the Army may have been involved in the murders and both agencies were trying to conceal their roles by shredding documents.

President Clinton ordered the Intelligence Oversight Board, a subcommittee of an independent advisory group, to do "a government-wide review of any and all aspects of the allegations" surrounding the two deaths in question "as well as [of] any related matters," a senior White House official said.

The board is expressly charged with reporting on any intelligence activities that may be unlawful or contrary to presidential orders.

In response to the allegations that documents were being destroyed, national security adviser Anthony Lake issued an order that all government agencies must preserve any related documents. At the request of the Justice Department, the FBI opened a probe into the allegations, and FBI officials contacted the NSA.

A senior Justice Department official said "all necessary steps have been taken to ensure the security of the premises" at the NSA headquarters in Fort Meade, Md., where documents allegedly were being destroyed. NSA inspector general Francis Newton said he too would probe the matter in conjunction with

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his counterparts at the CIA and the Defense Department.

The multiple probes raised the prospect of a broad government inquiry into U.S. actions during the 1980s and early 1990s to assist the Guatemalan military in waging a war against a leftist peasant insurgency. More than 100,000 Guatemalan citizens perished in the war amid repeated allegations of human rights abuses.

One of those killed was a U.S. citizen, Michael Devine, who ran an inn in rural Guatemala and may have been slain because he stumbled across information that was embarrassing to the Guatemalan military. The second was a guerrilla fighter, Efraim Bamaca Velasquez, married to a U.S. lawyer, Jennifer Harbury, who conducted two hunger strikes to pressure Washington for information about her husband's death.

Torricelli last week disclosed the CIA's links to a Guatemalan officer believed responsible for the two murders, Col. Julio Roberto Alpirez. The agency paid Alpirez $44,000 in 1992 after it had obtained evidence linking him to Devine's death, a decision that is among several matters being investigated by the CIA inspector general.

The new probes appear likely to go well beyond what the CIA knew or did, to include any documents in the hands of the Army or other intelligence agencies about the U.S. military's extensive assistance to the Guatemalan military before 1990. Washington cut off such direct aid af-

ter Devine's death, but continued training Guatemalan military officers and maintained its intelligence connections.

Officials said yesterday that the CIA's involvement in the war was authorized by a series of presidential directives, including a finding in effect during the late 1980s and early 1990s that ordered the collection of intelligence information related to ties between Guatemalan insurgents and Cuba. The CIA then turned that information over to the U.S. military in Guatemala, which was assisting the Guatemalan army in an attempt to extinguish the opposition.

An unsigned letter received late Tuesday by Torricelli, printed on National Security Agency stationery, claimed that "extensive communication intercepts by NSA in Guatemala during the time of these murders clearly substantiate that the CIA and the DOD [Department of Defense] knew, at that time, the circumstances" of the murders.

The claim conflicts with acting CIA Director William Studeman's public statement last week that the agency did not know the circumstances surrounding the two deaths until long after they occurred.

The unsigned letter went on to claim that "U.S. Army Special Forces personnel in Guatemala were providing information to Colonel Alpirez regarding Bamaca and Michael Devine," an action that could have given them a direct role in the deaths.

The letter went on to warn that "efforts are currently being made to cover up involvement of the U.S. Army" in having helped Alpirez. It charged specifically that Col. Daniel D. Day, an Army intelligence officer assigned to the NSA, was working with the Army deputy chief of staff for intelligence to purge "certain records regarding communications intercepts which show U.S. Army Intelligence involvement in these incidents."

Army chief of public affairs Col. Donald P. Maple said that the Army considered the allegations "serious" and was looking into the matter. He confirmed that Day was assigned to work at the NSA. Day could not be reached for comment because an NSA operator declined to put through a call to him.

Lt. Gen. Paul E. Menoher Jr., the Army's deputy chief of staff for intelligence, said in a telephone interview that "there's absolutely no truth" to the allegations. He said that upon learning about them, he signed a directive ordering that nothing be destroyed.

"I have not directed any nor am I aware of any" document destruction, Menoher said. "We are absolutely looking into this and want to be sure this is absolutely being handled above board."

A White House official said the president was concerned about the allegations and that "this raises obviously a serious issue." Another official said that the CIA, Justice Department and State Department have been ordered to give the National Security Council detailed chronologies of what they knew about the two deaths and when they learned it, by no later than Friday.

Staff writers Walter Pincus and Pierre Thomas contributed to this report.